The Dynamics of Marginality: A Study of Select Autobiographical Writings of Indian Disabled Women

PhD Synopsis

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Power has always been structured and distributed in terms of 'margin' and 'centre'', that in reality, it functions in complicated, disseminated and manifold ways. The Marginal, hence, may designate one's positionality. Similarly, marginalization can best be understood in terms of "limitations of a subject's access to power" (Aschcroft et.al. 121). It is a process where an individual or a group is denied access to significant positions and symbols of political, social, economic and religious power within any community or society. Marginality can be expressed as a socio-psychological phenomenon or as a post-colonial concern that speaks about the predicament of the population living at the margin or periphery, away from the centre of the power structure. Marginality is a condition constructed by the privileged people holding power. Marginalization of a group or an individual may stem from race, gender, caste, class and many more other factors like physical impairment, oddity, inability etc. Hence, disability, as it is observed, is one of the most subordinated subjects in this well-established grid of categories. The title "Dynamics of Marginality" means the factors that cause the marginalization of disabled people and their ultimate resistance to marginalization. Moreover, it is concerned with different levels of disability marginalisation.

Various socio-cultural and political discourses in the mainstream society have turned the body from a 'neutral object' simply referred to as a human anatomical or biological entity, into a "politically inscribed entity" that signifies diverse meanings and connotations according to its multiple variations. Throughout human history we have perceived that human bodies are always discerned by their different bodily traits, looks, appearances, colours and abilities where some bodies are given priorities and where some are distinguished as inferior or 'other' through the process of 'normalization' handled by these various socio-cultural and political discourses. Bodies that conform to or fit these predetermined structured cultural norms that were made over a considerable period of time are considered 'normates' who have the ability to perform specific roles assigned to them or those who don't fit into this set of norms are termed as 'deviant' or 'disabled' or 'imperfect'. Thus, bodies have been transformed into symbols of social power and privilege on one hand and on the other hand, it has been transmuted into the symbol of social oppression and 'other' by the normative culture. That is why the black body

has been vulnerable to the white body, similarly to the female body to their male counterparts and the disabled body to the abled body.

Deformed bodies have been categorized as a non-normative section because they don't fit into the already established culture of 'norms', and because of their ‘differences’ they always become subject to oppression and objectification. These oppressed and marginalized bodies like other categories such as the female body or racial body are purely observed from the viewpoint of the medical model or science that situates disability as exclusively an individual defect that needs medical intervention. Thus, making disabled bodies in Foucault's terms are 'docile bodies', and a "subject to improvement and usefulness, an object and target of power" (Anderson, 256). Normal society discriminates against them as inferior beings as compared to their fellow normal beings as the nondisabled world considers them 'helpless', 'dependent', 'incapable', and 'subhuman' and therefore, they are not able to add any valuable contributions to the society. Marilyn Martone argues that persons with disabilities usually get poor treatment. They have been stigmatised, sometimes viewed as deviants, and in most cases suffered society's rejection. Disabled people are denied access to many of the key economic, political and social rights and opportunities like education, health care or employment. Moreover, the outcome of inadequate physical environments and social and attitudinal barriers restrict and exclude persons with disabilities from taking part in the life of normal society. Various religious and cultural beliefs attached to disability like disability is the result of God's punishment for the sins that he or she committed at previous birth, also lead these people to experience society's rejection. These people with 'deformed' bodies are even denied the to choose their sexuality, they are often treated as 'asexual'. The situation of women with disabilities is even more grave and serious "due to the prevalence of traditional gender roles and expectations" (Mehrotra 407). Disabled women are often confined to the domestic space of the home and prohibited from all social and economic participation.

In Literature and other cultural media, disability is primarily represented through the prism of metaphor. Garland- Thomson in the book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* says "disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction...whose bodily configurations operate a spectacle, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance" (Garland-Thomson 9). So, in literature and mass media too characters with disability have not earned any respectable position. In their groundbreaking work *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* while talking about the representation of disabled

characters in American Fiction David T. Mitchel and Sharon L. Snyder explain how disability is merely used in literature as a prop, a prosthesis depending on which the whole narrative is constructed. In the article entitled *Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?* Tom Shakespeare says that "disability is the most active and prominent metaphor (citation needed)" Literary representations always have the tendency to portray disability "as either a source of pity or threat" (Hall 37). In narratives containing disabled figures and films disability is not treated in the actual way it is "instead used to shore up and stabilise ideas of the normal or to tell readers something about the plot and deepen understanding of central, non-disabled characters" (37).

However, a drastic shift occurred in the immediate aftermath of the politically oriented disability rights movement towards the late 1960s and early 1970s when particularly in America and the United Kingdom disabled activists began to demand their various social, political and civil rights, which eventually gave rise to the interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies which has continued to expand in present times almost all over the world. Various disabled figures also have taken the opportunity to express themselves through the medium of writing an autobiography. These autobiographical narratives not only act as the medium of their self-expression, but they also retort the stereotypical and manipulated representation of disability as counter discursive narratives. Unlike other forms of literature and cultural arts disabled autobiography presents disability "as a fact not a trope, a living condition not a metaphor for some undesirable moral status, which is too often the case in fiction, drama, and film" (Couser 306).

The field of disability studies in India has not emerged fully like the other western countries. However, in recent times, many Indian Disability theorists are trying to change and react against the long-established false notions and prejudices prevalent in Indian society. In this respect theorists like Anita Ghai, Renu Addlakha, N. Mehrotra and Shubhangi Vaidya are to be mentioned. Besides, these disability theorists, disability rights activists like Malini Chib, Shivani Gupta, Preeti Monga and Naseema also through their life writings have expressed their resistance against the prevalent false notions of disability, accept their deformed bodies and demand their rights as well, and they critique the society that always shows antipathy towards them.

All the autobiographies selected for this proposed study, present the personal struggles and challenges that they endure to live in a 'normal' society and their ultimate victory over their

disability by overcoming those planned barriers of the society. In Malini Chibs' *One Little Finger* she tells of her struggle to live with cerebral palsy, how society always views them as ‘other' and how she often gets society's rejection because of her disability and how she ultimately triumphs over her marginal position. Similarly, Shivani Gupta's autobiography *No Looking Back* also takes us to her disrupted world where she is paralyzed and constantly copes with our so-called 'normal' society. Preeti Monga’s autobiography *The Other Senses* similarly tells what it means to be born as a visually impaired in a society that always shows antipathy toward them and how she overcomes all of her obstacles. Naseema's *The Incredible Story* talks not just about her disability experience and her triumph, rather it focuses on the collective marginalised disability experiences of people like her living in utterly deplorable positions in India. These texts show how society rejects them for having 'different' bodies.

Disability autobiography or life narratives in India is itself an emerging genre. Therefore, substantial research has not been conducted yet in this area. However, the few existing kinds of literature that have been pursued by some scholars are not adequate in the sense that they have not explored this territory as it demands. In that accomplished scholarship, they haven’t discussed this disability autobiography as a discourse of active resistance against the dominant culture of norms. Separate studies have been conducted on the autobiography of Malini Chib, Shivani Gupta, Preeti Monga and Naseema Huzruk, however, there hasn’t been a broader in-depth collective study that addresses the issues of disability, marginalization and resistance. Moreover, a critical theoretical analysis is also missing from their scholarship. Therefore, a broader analysis of such unexplored topics will certainly help society to unveil the complex notion/nature of the disability and how do the myriad factors of disability encroach on the lived experience of the disabled people. So, this proposed study will be an endeavour to look into these undiscovered terrains critically by employing various interdisciplinary theoretical concepts ranging from Disability Studies to other significant theories of marginality studies.

Review of Literature:

(1) In his insightful essay "*One Little Finger*: An Outcry for Inclusive Society", Vishal Singh very critically attempts to explore examining Chib's autobiography *One Little Finger* the suffering, discrimination that people like Malini Chib confront on daily basis, particularly in India. He tries to argue that disabled people don't always cry for help and pity, rather they want to be treated like other ‘normal’ human beings.

(2) "Critiquing Cultural and Climatic Norms for the Disabled in India: Reading Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*" is a thought-provoking article written by Gunjan Kumari. Drawing upon Malini Chib's autobiography *One Little Finger,* the central argument of her essay is to critique the 'norms' defined by 'culture' and the place of the disabled population in the society with special reference to South Asian countries, especially India. She says that the hierarchy or social order established by the society forces certain sections of the society to an extent that they are regarded beyond the periphery of the society. Her question is that in these circumstances if it is really possible to imagine or establish a healthy or composite culture.

(3**)** Pratima Singh in her intuitive article entitled "Disability and Quest for Identity: A Reflection on Disabled Lives" also critically inspects the present status of disability in contemporary India. She demonstrates Chib's *One Little Finger* and Shivani Gupta's *No Looking Back: A True* Story for developing her arguments. Singh, like other prominent adherents of disability studies, believes that disability is a social, cultural and political construction that needs to be altered. She then discusses how these two marginalized individuals defy all odds that come their way to embodiment and how they form their own self identity rejecting the imposed social identity.

(4) In his scintillating discourse "No Home for the Disabled: The Disabling Metropolis of Delhi" Someshwar Sati drawing on Shivani Gupta's autobiography *No Looking Back* denounces a great many unfriendly infrastructures of Delhi, the capital city of India for the differently-abled population who because of these inaccessible 'social and architectural construction', always have to negotiate with their own selves. His central argument in this article is that the established environment of the national capital is never designed keeping in mind people like Shivani Gupta and which needs to be changed to form an inclusive society for all.

(5) Pramod K. Nayar in his stimulating and provocative essay entitled "Writing Disability and Rights in *Naseema*" explores the autobiography of Naseema Huzruk, founder-president of the Helpers of the Handicapped Kolhapur (HOHK). Originally a chapter in the book *Human Rights in Postcolonial India* edited by Omprakash Dwivedi and Julie Rajan, this article is divided into three subsections discussing discourses of impairment, disability and moral webs, aspirations and rights. Naseema's narrative as Nayar suggests is not only a text that demands the rights of the disabled rather he believes that it actually functions as an agency to express the

desire for a better society. He concludes his essay by saying that Naseema's narrative compels us to dismantle the binary of differences.

(6) The central focus of S. Gokul's incisive article "Understanding the relation of Religion and Disability: A Study of Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* and Naseema Hurzuk's *The Incredible Story*" is to discuss the unavoidable collateral correspondence between religion and disability that he executes brilliantly by incorporating two autobiographical narratives of Naseema and Preeti Monga. He brilliantly points out how religion plays a crucial role in both of the autobiographers' lives and also attempts to argue how these autobiographers defy the extra weight of religion upon their lives.

(7) "Identity through Multiple Identifications: An Analysis of Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* in the perspective of Disability Studies" by G. Karthik approaches Monga's Narrative by analyzing it through various models of disability to" mark her disabled identity in overcoming the imposed social barriers, which are related to her visual impairment with respect to medical treatments, social implications, self awareness on the difference between impairment and disability."

(8) The essays in this edited volume *Disability Studies in India: Global Discourses, Local Realities* edited by Renu Addlakha, a prominent disability theorist of India, cover some recent phenomenal works on Disability Studies in India. The collection of essays of this edited volume discusses the concept of disability from multidisciplinary perspectives ranging from subjective experiences to various theoretical aspects.

(9) Published in 2015, Anita Ghai's *Rethinking Disability in India* is a critical book that offers us to better understand the lives of the disabled people in India, various existing theories related to disability and other social and cultural issues related to this area. Positioning disability as a socio, cultural and political phenomenon, Ghai with her extensive knowledge and experience in this field, argues that disability is a 'difference' and that 'difference' should be accepted as a part of social diversity.

About the Autobiographers:

Malini Chib: Malini Chib is one of the prominent active disability rights activists and authors in India. Born in Kolkata in 1996, Malini suffers from cerebral palsy, a congenital dysfunction of movement, muscle tone or posture. She is popularly known widely for her 2011 autobiography *One Little Finger* published by Sage where she accounts both her experiences

as a disabled individual both in India as well as the U.K. Her autobiography is the inspiration behind the Hindi movie *Margarita with a Straw* released in 2014.

Shivani Gupta: Founder of Access Ability, a professional and advanced accessibility consultancy, Shivani Gupta is a disability rights activist, researcher, artist and author who met with a horrible accident at the age of 22 which rendered her quadriplegic. Her autobiography *No Looking Back* (2014) offers us to see a dark world of Gupta after a fatal accident that changed her life completely. In that book, she very boldly as well emotionally documents her life after she became disabled and how she fights back against her disability.

Preeti Monga: Blind since the age of 6, Preeti Monga is known as the first visually impaired Indian aerobics instructor, disability rights activist, motivational speaker, sexual harassment consultant and a brilliant author. She has penned down her continuous struggles as a visually impaired person in her autobiography *The Other Senses*. In her encouraging autobiographical narrative, *The Other senses*, she recounts a moving account of life for a visually impaired woman growing up in India, lucky enough to get wonderful parents who continuously support her. Her narrative encourages us to never give up.

Naseema Huzruk: The founder-president of the Helpers of the Handicapped, she penned down her life story in her brilliantly accomplished autobiography *Chakachi Khurchi*, originally published in Marathi and later translated into English with the title *Naseema: The Incredible Story*. Her autobiography also tells how she fought against all odds that come her way to her self realization and self embodiment.

Research Aims and Objectives

The present study intends to explore some select autobiographies written by Indian disabled women activists from the perspective of interdisciplinary Disability Studies. The work seeks to examine how these disability rights activists cum autobiographers face different forms of marginalization and discrimination in their lives in contemporary Indian society, and how they overcome the challenges and barriers by creating their own individual identities. Besides, it also seeks to interrogate how they resist the culture of norms through the medium of self narrative. So, the study will not just be an attempt to analyze these autobiographies as merely subjective stories of overcoming, rather it will scrutinize these texts as discourses of intellectual and political resistance. The study will argue for the voice of disability. Since the

texts taken for the study have all been written by female authors and there are some references too that these autobiographers reflect in their writings on the challenges of women with disability, this is why the current study shall also inquire if women and girls with disabilities are subjected to double discrimination, alienation and deprivation. The study has the following specific objectives:

(a) To study the status of persons with disabilities and impairments in India.

(b) To explore how in Indian society the disabled population has been marginalized because of their 'different' bodily appearances.

(c) To examine if women or girls with disabilities have to suffer both the oppression of gender and disability.

(d) To investigate how these disabled autobiographers overcome their marginal status and also resist, through their writings, the dominant culture of norms.

However, this present study entitled *Dynamics of Marginality: A Study of Select Autobiographers of Indian Disabled Women* doesn't affirm to be all inclusive as the study intends to restrict its focus only to select works. Hence, the findings or the outcomes will also be based on the same.

Research Methodology:

The proposed research would be carried out systematically by employing a qualitative research method. The research would consist of close reading of primary sources as well as available secondary sources. A questionnaire method will be used to interact with the selected autobiographers for enriching the study. Moreover, different models of disability would be used as useful tools to understand the subject of disability. The idea of the Marxist notion of false consciousness will also be applied to explore and analyse the psychodynamics of people with disabilities that are associated with the belief that they are less capable than others and are subjects of self-pity, self-hate and shame. The perspective of feminist disability studies will be engaged here to study critically the case of women with disability. Several theoretical ideas

from postcolonial theory would be much helpful in comprehending the complex notion of disability. Hence, the approaches will be interdisciplinary and will be supported by multiple theoretical perspectives.

Relevance of the Study:

The proposed research will attempt to provide and add some insightful information to the existing corpus of Disability Studies and to create awareness among common readers as well as scholars about the oppressed section of the society. It may help in changing thoughts regarding disability. It may help in reconstructing a balanced or justifiable healthy society based on the foundation of liberty, fraternity, equality and social justice.

Chapterisation

The proposed research project has the following tentative chapters that might be changed in course of research.

Chapter I: Introduction: A Glimpse of Indian Disability Writings and Critical Studies

Chapter II: Representation of Disability in Indian Literature: Fiction, Non-Fiction and Life Writing

Chapter III: Aspects of Disability and Marginality in the Select Autobiographies

Chapter IV: Gendered Disability Experience in the Select Autobiographies

Chapter V: The Voices of Disability: Activism, Life Writing and Resistance

Chapter VI: Conclusion

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